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ABSTRACT

Since a discourse community may have its membership assigned both on the basis of speech or of writing, it follows that the concept of discourse community needs to be both medium-neutral and unconstrained by space and time. The defining characteristics of a discourse community might be (1) communality of interest, (2) mechanisms for intercommunication between members, (3) survival by providing information and feedback, (4) development of genre-specific discoursal expectations, (5) possession of an embedded dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology, and (6) a critical mass of members with a suitable degree of relevant discoursal and content expertise. Characterizing discourse communities in this way leads to several consequences--the most salient being that the fact that groups have things in common in no way implies that such groups form discourse communities. In addition, sketching the boundaries of discourse communities implies that individuals may belong to several communities and will vary in the number of communities they belong to and thus in the number of genres they command. Other points are that the criteria presented do not impose preconditions as to a prior expectation of a high level of personal involvement among members; a community may or may not be connected to what members perceive as the central activities and concerns of their lives; and discourse communities will vary in the extent to which they are norm developed or set in their ways. (References are attached.) (NKA)

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Approaching the Concept of Discourse Community: John Swales

As discourse analyst I have long had some interest in mini-texts such as titles. My investigations have led me to conclude that authors who begin their titles with participial forms thereby announce intentions to strive for pragmatic - if not always practical - relevance. Although I still wish to do something useful to the concept of discourse community, I am now confronted with the hubris of the promissory abstract. Operationalizing the concept has turned out, alas, to be not within my means; approaching it perhaps is.

One way of beginning the approach is to explore the relationship between the neonate concept of discourse community and its elder kin, speech community (Braithwaite, 1984). Speech community has been around for some time. For Bloomfield a speech community was composed of those who share similar linguistic rules , and in those terms we could legitimately refer to the speech community of the English-speaking world. If we admit that those rules are subject to considerable variation in terms of their phonetic expression, and further agree (with Labov) that the rules themselves are variable, then on that level we may still have no problem in concurring with Labov's conclusion that "New York City is a single speech community, and not a collection of speakers living side by side, borrowing

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occasionally from each other's dialects". But, of course, phonological variation is not all. If you fail to understand me today, I venture to suggest that it will not be because I employ an alien and bizarre vowel system.

A second way of looking at speech communities (Fishman, Gumperz) has been to look for patterned regularities in the use of speech. Hence a discourse community is composed of those who share functional rules that determine the appropriacy of utterances. A third way (popular with sociologists and anthropologists) is to look beyond language and claim that a speech community consists of those who share underlying culture knowledge -- value and belief systems and the like. Finally, there are intergrationists led by Hymes who adopt all three criteria: shared linguistic forms, shared regulative rules and shared cultural concepts. The kind of speech community that results is inevitably more constrained; for example, communities of urban black teenagers, military personnel or the inhabitants of Lake Wobegon. But are such communities discourse communities? I do not think so, or perhaps, not necessarily so.

For one thing, these sociolinguistic constructs are primarily held together by speech. Whatever a discourse community may be, it could equally well have its membership assigned on the basis of writings. It follows that the concept of discourse community needs to be both medium-neutral, and to be unconstrained by space and time. We may correspond with co-members in distant places; we react and

respond to writings from the past. A discourse community is not necessarily neighborly, nor locked into a prison or a ship.

Secondly, the Hymesian concept has rather too much of "community" and not enough of "discourse" for our purposes. In a speech community, the community creates the discourse; in a discourse community, the discourse creates the community. (Well perhaps). Certainly,unless we want to extend the shared linguistic forms to include sharing of particular registral features, unless we want to extend shared regulative rules to situations where Gricean maxims do not apply (as in Unequal Encounters), and unless we want to disperse shared cultural concepts into a wide and often conflicting array of occupational, professional and activity norms, then I do not think the two types of community can be usefully conflated. In terms of the fabric of society, speech communities are centripetal (they pull people in), whilst discourse communities are centrifugal (they set people, or parts of people, apart). To borrow a term from the TESOL organization, discourse communities are typically Special Interest Groups.

At last year's conference Bruce Herzberg gave a very interesting paper entitled "The Politics of Discourse Communities". In his opening remarks he made the following two statements:

i) Use of the term 'discourse community' testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse

operates within conventions defined by communities, be they academic disciplines or social groups.

ii) The idea of a 'discourse community' is not well-defined as yet, but like many imperfectly defined terms, it is suggestive, the center of a set of ideas rather than the sign of a settled notion.

While I agree with the substance of these remarks, I also believe that if discourse community is to be "the center of a set of ideas" then we can reasonably expect it to be rather more of "a settled notion" than is apparently the case.

What then might be the defining characteristics of discourse communities? I suggest the following.

a) The discourse community has a communality of interest; i.e. at some level the members share common public goals. (The goals are public; spies join discourse communities for private purposes of subversion; people may membership sporting clubs with disguised commercial or sexual intentions.) (The common public goal may be not that apparent on the surface level. Suppose, for example, there exists a discourse community of legislators, their aides, lobbyists, political journalists etc. As we know, this community will consist of overtly adversarial sub-groups, but they all will share some goal such as manufacturing legislation).

b) The discourse community has mechanisms for intercommunication between members; in terms of Herrington

(1985) it will have "a forum". The participatory mechanisms may be various: meetings, telecommunications, correspondence, bulletins and so forth.

c) In consequence of a) and b) the discourse community survives by providing information and feedback, even if that information is itself used for various purposes, such as improving performance in a football squad or in an orchestra, making money in a brokerage house, or denting the research front in an academic department.

d) The discourse community has developed and continues to develop discoursal expectations. These may involve appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discoursal elements, and the roles texts play in the operation of the discourse community. In so far as 'genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them' (Martin 1985), these discoursal expectations create the genres that articulate the operations of the discourse community (Swales, 1985).

e) As a result of all of the above, the discourse community possesses an inbuilt dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology. Nowhere is this more evident than in the development of community-specific acronyms and abbreviations.

f) The discourse community has a critical mass of members with a suitable degree of relevant discoursal and content expertize. Discourse communities have changing memberships; people enter as apprentices and leave, by death or in other

less involuntary ways. However, survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between experts and novices. This is why academic classes are rarely at the outset discourse communities but may develop into them (Marenghi, 1986).

Characterizing discourse communities in this kind of way leads to a number of consequences. First, the fact that groups have things in common in no way implies that such groups form discourse communities. For one reason or another, the following fail to qualify: the stockholders of General Motors, The Book of the Month Club, members of political parties, employees of a major organization, patrons of Harry's Bar, guests at this hotel and so forth.

Secondly, sketching the boundaries of discourse communities in ways that I have attempted implies (a) that individuals may belong to several discourse communities and (b) that individuals will vary in the number of discourse communities they belong to and hence in the number of genres they command. At one extreme there may be a sense of discourse community deprivation - 'Cooped up in the house with the children all day'. At the other extreme, there stands the skilled professional journalist with her chameleon-like ability to assume temporary membership of a wide range of discourse communities.

Third, the criteria I have given do not impose pre-conditions with regard to at least three features. First, there is no prior expectation of a high level of personal

involvement among the members. As we shall see, a discourse community can operate successfully even when the level of personal relationship remains low. Second, a discourse community may or may not be connected to what the members perceive as the central activities and concerns of their lives, activities that are perhaps involved with income, success, family responsibility and so on. Finally, discourse communities will vary in the extent to which they are norm-developed, or have their set and settled ways. Some will be extremely conservative ("This is the way we do things here") while others may be constantly evolving.

Before I conclude by giving two examples of how we might utilize this approach, let me underline the fragility of my enterprise by discussing a difficulty raised by one of my graduate students. This has become known to my Discourse Analysis class as "The Cafe Owner Problem". In generalized form, the problem goes as follows: Individuals A, B, C and so on occupy the same professional roles in life. They interact (in speech and writing) with the same clienteles; they originate, receive and respond to the same kind of messages for the same purposes; they have an approximately similar range of genre skills. And yet, as cafe-owners working long hours in their own establishments, and not being members of the Local Chamber of Commerce A, B and C never interact with one another. Do they form a discourse community? Or to put it another way, what do we do about visible uncolleges, in which there is no apparent "forum"?

Notice that the 'Cafe Owner' problem is not quite like those situations where A, B and C operate as 'point'. A, B and C may be lighthouse keepers on their lonely rocks, or missionaries in their separate jungles, or neglected consular officials in their rotting outposts. In all these cases, although A and B and C may never interact, they all have lines of communication back to base, and presumably acquired discourse community membership as a key element in their initial training. If the 'Cafe Owner' paradox actually occurs, I have no present resolution of it.

The first of my two examples relates to a non-academic discourse community.

Last year Lester Faigley raised the question of whether a hobby-group could constitute a discourse community. I believe, in the light of my criteria and on the basis of personal experience, that the answer is firmly in the affirmative. As it happens, I belong to two hobby groups. One is a world-wide philatelic grouping of about 300 people who specialize in the postal history of Hong Kong. This is a group that operates partly by correspondence and phone call, but principally through a bi-monthly bulletin and newsletter (the latest to arrive is No. 260). Two extracts from the bulletin are given on the handout, as is a lot from a recent specialized auction catalogue. The catalogue illustrates a key genre in this discourse community. The catalogue is fully explicit for me, but not I think for you; moreover, I could also advise as to whether the estimated

realization was too high, too low or about right. The Hong Kong Study Circle meets all six defining criteria that I have listed. There is common goal, forum, information exchange, genre development, specialized terminology and expertize.

The second hobby group I belong to is the Local Audobon Society. As a local organization, the forum in this case is created by the telephone, a newsletter, and monthly field-trips, meetings and talks. One interesting aspect of discussion among birdwatchers at the local Audobon is the high level of technical rhetoric displayed and expected (although the very young, the very old and the very new are excused this requirement). Thus we find comments like:

"Apart from Blackpolls fall immatures seem down this year".

Or this kind of carefully formulated question raised after the last talk I attended:

"Would you like to estimate the relative seriousness of gull versus crow predation of eggs and hatchlings".

Again, this feels like a discourse community to me, just as I feel that there is one in the English Language Institute where I work.

Although the two hobby groups differ in that one is distanced and the other proximate, they share several features. Both are essentially detached from personal involvement. In neither case, do I know much about what my co-members do for a living, whether they are rich or poor,

believe in a supernatural being, have satisfactory sex lives etc. Nor do these discourse communities have much to do with 9-to-5 existence, or with paying the bills or with educational progress. Of course other hobby groups may be different: members of amateur dramatic discourse communities are somewhat notorious for their level of inter-personal involvement, whilst membership of professional associations may be closely connected to the business of a career.

My closing example is academic and needs to be brief. I have chosen therefore to simply apply my emerging thoughts to Anne Herrington's study of the contexts for writing in two college Chemical Engineering classes. I have done this because I believe the Herrington study to be both highly regarded and reasonably well known. You may remember Herrington's conclusions: The Chem Eng Lab course and the Chem Eng Design Process course "represented distinct communities where different issues were addressed, different lines of reasoning used, different writer and audience roles assumed, and different social purposes served by writing". If we also note that the two courses were taught in the same department at the same institution by the same staff to largely the same students, then the Herrington study shows that there may be more of invention than we would like to see in our models of disciplinary culture.

However, if we apply the variable features of discourse communities that I have mentioned to the Herrington findings, we can, at the least, obtain another angle on the

disparity. Writing in the lab course was connected to the "display familiarity" macro-act of college assignments (Horowitz, 1986). Writing in the design course was connected to the persuasive reporting macro-act of the outside professional world. The lab course was norm-developed, while the design course was norm-developing. As Herrington observes, in lab both students and faculty were all too aware that the conceptual issue in the assignments was not an issue for the audience - the professor knew the answers. But it was an issue in Design. As a part consequence, the lab 'forum' was much more disengaged than that in Design, where professor and student interacted together in a joint problem-solving environment.

I have in this short paper offered up for challenge and rebuttal a conceptualization of discourse community. Whether it has the pragmatic relevance I alluded to at the beginning is questionable; whether there is need to strive to settle the notion is perhaps also questionable. Indeed my membership of your own discourse community is itself questionable, but I believe I have learnt enough of your discoursal expectations to know that it is about now that I should be sitting down and shutting up.

The Concept of Discourse Community: John Swales

(1) Criteria

A discourse community has:

a) a communality of interest

b) participatory mechanisms

c) information exchange

d) genre-specific discoursal expectations

e) a dynamic towards specialized language

f) a critical mass of expertize.

(2) Discourse communities vary according to

a) the degree of personal involvement

b) the degree of connection

c) the extent of norm-development.

(3)a **2. Hong Kong, Type 12, with Index**
No one has yet produced another example of this c.d.s. that I mentioned on J.256/7 as having been found with an index letter 'C' with its opening facing downwards, but Mr. Scamp reports that he has seen one illustrated in an auction catalogue having a normal 'C' and dated MY 9/59 (Type 12 is the 20mm single-circle broken in upper half by HONG-KONG). It must be in someone's collection!

3. The B.P.O.'s in Kobe and Nagasaki
Mr. Pullan disputes the statement at the top of J.257/3 that 'If the postal cerk had not violated regulations by affixing the MR 17/79 (HIOGO) datestamp on the front, we might have no example of this c.d.s. at all.' He states that 'By 1879 it was normal practice for the sorter's datestamp to be struck on the front, the change from the back of the cover occurring generally in 1877, though there are isolated earlier examples'; thus there was no violation of regulations.

(3)b 1176 1899 Combination PPC to Europe franked CIP 4 C canc large CANTON dollar chop, pair HK 2 C carmine added & canc Hong Kong index B cds. Arr cds. (1) (Photo) HK $1500.

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